

J.C. LORE OYSTER HOUSE
14430 Solomons Island Road
Solomons
Calvert
Maryland

HAER MD-139
MD-139

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

J.C. LORE OYSTER HOUSE

HAER No. MD-139

LOCATION: 14430 Solomons Island Road, Solomons, Calvert County, Maryland

DATE OF
CONSTRUCTION: 1934, built as a replacement to the original 1922 structure after it was damaged in a 1933 hurricane

ARCHITECT/
BUILDER: An unnamed contractor designed and built the oyster house with input from the Lore family.

PRESENT OWNER: Calvert County Government, operated by Calvert Marine Museum

SIGNIFICANCE: The J.C. Lore Oyster House survives as an intact example of a vernacular seafood packing plant dating to the early twentieth century when Maryland was the country's leading oyster producer. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2001.

HISTORIAN: Justine Christianson, HAER Historian, 2007

PROJECT
INFORMATION: This project was undertaken by the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), a division of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, in cooperation with the Calvert Marine Museum (C. Douglass Alves Jr., Director). Richard Dodds, Maritime History Curator, and Robert Hurry, Registrar, provided access and research assistance. Todd Croteau, HAER Architect, produced the measured drawings and large format photographs. Justine Christianson, HAER Historian, wrote the report.

INTRODUCTION

Designated a National Historic Landmark in 2001, the J.C. Lore Oyster House stands on the banks of the Patuxent River in Solomons, Maryland, as a “rare surviving example of a relatively unaltered early-20th-century seafood packing plant.”¹ The Lore Oyster House was the second largest of approximately thirty-five oyster packing companies located along the 110 mile-long Patuxent River, a Chesapeake Bay tributary. The J.C. Lore & Sons Company was in business from 1888-1978, making it the longest in continual operation of the Patuxent River companies.²

The Lore Oyster House’s period of operation coincides with the Maryland oyster industry’s period of peak production and subsequent decline. The New York and New England regions were the original centers of the oyster industry in the early nineteenth century. New Haven, Connecticut was the oyster capital of the United States in the 1820s and 1830s. Overharvesting in these regions, however, resulted in a shift in production to the abundant Chesapeake Bay in the mid-nineteenth century. For nearly a hundred years, the Chesapeake Bay was the center of the industry, although harvesting took place in other locations such as the Gulf of Mexico and Canada.³ By the 1880s, the Chesapeake Bay produced 75 percent of the total U.S. oyster output, with Maryland accounting for 50 percent and Virginia the remaining 25 percent.⁴ Consumer demand fueled the Chesapeake Bay oyster industry, the result of improvements in canning technology and the expansion of the railroad. Combined, these two factors allowed the perishable oyster to be safely transported to tables across the United States.

The oyster industry was able to weather consumer fears about the safety of shellfish consumption after a typhoid outbreak in Chicago, Washington, and New York in 1924-25 was traced to oysters tainted by sewage through the establishment of regulatory agencies and governmental oversight programs. The industry had already started its decline prior to the typhoid scare. Ultimately, it would not be changing consumers tastes or concerns about consumption that would substantially impact the industry but rather the increasingly poor productivity of the Chesapeake Bay.⁵ In 1885, more than 15 million bushels of oysters were harvested, but by 2004, that number had dropped to 26,495 bushels. The fragile balance of the Chesapeake Bay’s ecosystem was disrupted by a number of factors. The introduction of dredging as a harvesting method contributed to the decline of the quality of oyster beds. The dredge removed everything in its

¹ Ralph Eshelman, “J.C. Lore Oyster House,” National Historic Landmark (NHL) Nomination, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, (August 26, 1993), 10.

² Eshelman, “J.C. Lore Oyster House,” NHL Nomination, 12. See Figure 10, p. 36 in Paula J. Johnson, ed., *Working the Water: The Commercial Fisheries of Maryland’s Patuxent River* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1988) for a map listing Patuxent area companies. For an updated list of packers in Charles County, Calvert County, and St. Mary’s County, see Richard J. Dodds and Robert J. Hurry, “*It Ain’t Like It Was Then*”: *The Seafood Packing Industry of Southern Maryland* (Solomons, MD: Calvert Marine Museum, 2006).

³ “American Oyster Culture,” *Scribner’s Monthly* 15, no. 2 (December 1877): 226, available at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>, accessed December 2004; Clyde L. MacKenzie, Jr., “History of Oystering in the United States and Canada,” *Marine Fisheries Review* (Fall 1996), available at http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3089/is_n4/v58/ai1984347493, accessed December 2004.

⁴ Richard E. Sutter, Thomas D. Corrigan, and Robert H. Wuhrman, “The Commercial Fishing and Seafood Processing Industry of the Chesapeake Bay Area” (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, Agricultural Experiment Station, November 1968), 26.

⁵ Dodds and Hurry, 3. In Maryland, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, overseen by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, had oversight of the shellfish industry.

path, including the dead oysters whose shells formed the ideal cultch upon which young oysters attached, thereby replenishing the bed. With shell removal, silt was able to build up, further reducing the chance of replenishment and continuing the deterioration. In addition, environmental factors, including pollution and rising nitrogen and phosphorus levels that spurred algae growth and led to “dead zones,” negatively impacted oyster yields. The 1950s saw the appearance of two parasites, MSX (*Haplosporidium nelson*) and Dermo (*Perkinsus marinus*), that attacked the state’s oysters. To combat the declining oyster industry, the State of Maryland has a number of initiatives in place to restore the Chesapeake Bay, including creating state seed areas, establishing the 1983 Chesapeake Bay Program and the 1994 Oyster Recovery Partnership, as well as exploring the controversial idea of introducing the Asian oyster (*Crassostrea ariakensis*). In addition, Circle C Oyster Ranchers Association has been developing oyster aquaculture since 1992 as another way to preserve Maryland’s oyster industry.⁶ Vernacular structures housing seafood processing operations once characterized Maryland’s shorelines but declining yields and changing consumer tastes caused companies to abandon their plants. The J.C. Lore Oyster House remains as an important remnant of Maryland’s once great oyster industry.

DESCRIPTION

In 1922, Joseph Lore Sr. had a packing house constructed along “The Narrows” (a tributary of the Patuxent River) in Solomons, Maryland. The original packing house was a one-story frame structure with a hipped roof with a ridge located on the site of the current J.C. Lore Oyster House. A photograph exists from ca. 1930 of the original building showing the front façade clad in clapboard siding and punctuated by two doors and four windows. Painted in large letters on the front façade was the following.

J.C. LORE & SONS
FISH OYSTERS & CRABS
BOATS FOR HIRE⁷

On August 23, 1933 a hurricane hit the area, flooding the Lores’ packing house and causing such extensive damage that the building had to be replaced. According to Joseph Lore Jr., the new building was a collaborative effort between the contractor and the Lores. He remembered that when designing the new packing house, “we just had our own ideas, our own plans. We had a contractor there and he had his ideas, and we had our ideas and we pooled them together and

⁶ Dodds and Hurry, see Chapter 5; G.F. Beaven, “Maryland’s Oyster Problem,” (Solomons Island, MD: State of Maryland, Board of Natural Resources, Department of Research and Education, Educational Series No. 8, May 1945).

⁷ Photograph, Catalog#: P-10523, Title: “J.C. Lore & Sons seafood business with school bus parked at side, view from road circa 1930. Kenneth Lore’s confectionary is at right”; Photograph, Catalog #: P-10524, Title: “Joseph C. Lore, Sr. in doorway of J.C. Lore & Sons seafood business circa 1930. Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic church is in left background,” both in Calvert Marine Museum Library (hereafter cited as CMM Library). According to Joseph Lore Jr., the water necessary for the processing was pumped into a 1200 gallon tank located at the north exterior end of the building. Paula Johnson and Peter Kurtze, interview with Joseph C. Lore Jr., Tape Number PRP81-PJR3 transcript, (October 20, 1981), 3, Patuxent River Folklife & Oral History Project, Lore Oyster house vertical file, H-L4, CMM Library.

came up with what we see there.”⁸ The new packing house represented a functional and efficient layout of work space with adaptations to the particular environment of the site. The location of the packing house on the water’s edge was necessary to make sure fresh seafood could be quickly delivered. As the Lores had already experienced after the hurricane, flooding was a potential issue, so a second story was planned. The second floor housed company documents and employee records in administrative offices, as well as supplies in two storage rooms. The first floor remained dedicated to processing and shipping. Completed in 1934, the J.C. Lore Oyster House has undergone few alterations. In 1945, the Lores had a new heating system installed. Twenty years later, a concrete block addition was constructed to the rear, and a fire suppression system was added.⁹

The packing house is bounded by Solomons Island Road to the front and “The Narrows” to the rear, an ideal location since fresh oysters and other seafood could be delivered by boat at the rear of the building and the processed seafood could then be shipped out the front. The packing house consists of the main two-story frame structure with a one-story extension at the rear. A one-story wing with a false front is located to the right of the main structure. A concrete block addition is at the rear of the main structure. Both the main building and wing are clad in shiplap siding. The main building has a side gable roof of standing seam metal. The one story wing has a flat roof while the rear extension to the main building has a shed roof of standing seam metal. The main building and wing rest on a concrete foundation that starts just under the front façade’s window sills, necessary because of the area’s tendency to flood. The fenestration of the front façade is irregular because it marks the interior division of space. It generally consists of six-over-six light double-hung sash, sometimes paired together in doubles or triples. The fenestration of the rest of the packing house is generally six-over-six light double-hung sash, although the rear one-story extension has two nine light fixed windows.

The concrete block addition was built in 1965 to the rear of the main building. According to Richard J. Dodds and Robert J. Hurry in *“It Ain’t Like It Was Then”: The Seafood Packing Industry of Southern Maryland*, the difference in material is indicative of changes in building oyster processing plants. Those built pre-World War I tended to be clad in wood siding while those dating to post-World War I generally were of concrete block construction with a frame roof.¹⁰ A set of double doors on the south wall of the concrete block addition opens to the rear of the main building. A metal shed roof covers this outdoor space. The 1965 addition has a slightly sloped roof, on top of which in the approximate center is a rectangular flat-roofed structure. This roof top structure has a hatch facing the water so that a conveyor could mechanically move fresh oysters up from the water’s edge into the building for processing.

The interiors of the first and second floors of the J.C. Lore Oyster House have different finishes. Since the first floor was dedicated to processing seafood, fresh packing the processed meat into cans, and storing it until shipment, the finishes are utilitarian. The floors are concrete and sloped for drainage, since they were generally wet while processing was taking place. The interior

⁸ Johnson and Kurtze, Lore interview, 4.

⁹ Ralph Eshelman, interview with Joseph C. Lore Jr., (May 18, 1979), Lore Oyster House vertical file, H-L4, CMM Library; Eshelman, “J.C. Lore Oyster House,” NHL Nomination, 7.

¹⁰ Dodds and Hurry, 4.

walls and ceilings are of painted wood paneling. The second floor has stained wood paneling in the administration areas. The floors are linoleum in the offices and wood everywhere else. The second floor storage areas are unfinished.

The packing process dictated the layout of the first floor. At the southern end of the first floor are the two shucking rooms. The southernmost shucking room, at 819 square feet, has a door at the rear and windows along the front, southern side, and rear walls.¹¹ The adjacent shucking room, slightly larger at 931 square feet, has doors at both the front and rear. A wall punctuated by window and door openings separates the two shucking rooms. The window openings allowed natural light to filter from the southernmost shucking room, which has three exterior walls, to the more dimly lit interior shucking room. The centers of both rooms were kept open for floormen who needed room to maneuver the wheelbarrows used to deliver oysters to the shuckers and remove discarded shells. Shuckers worked at concrete-covered tables running along the walls. A cloakroom was created in the southernmost shucking room ca. 1945 by erecting two partition walls at the front corner. Next to the cloakroom is a steam cabinet for sterilizing equipment. The Lores also had oil heat installed in 1945.¹² The other shucking room has a cast-iron stove in the center of the room for heating. In addition, this room has sinks at the northwest corner for hand washing and rinsing buckets. A pass-through window in the same location allowed shuckers to hand their buckets of oyster meat through to the adjacent processing room.

The 353 square foot processing room, located in the approximate center of the building, contained all the equipment necessary to clean and fresh pack oysters. It is accessed from the shipping room, located at the opposite end of the building from the shucking rooms. This was necessary to keep the detritus from the shucking operation away from the processed oyster meat. The processing room has two pass-through windows. One is located at the southwest corner of the room and provides access from the interior shucking room. Adjacent to this is a tally board used to record the output of each shucker. On the north wall is another pass-through window for the conveyor that sent the filled and sealed cans into the shipping room. Since the processing equipment required water and steam, there are numerous pipes crossing the ceiling and walls. Currently the processing room contains a scale, capping machines, a drain table, two blow tanks, two skimming tables, and a triple metal sink. The skimming table is a metal table frame with a stainless steel insert perforated on the bottom to let liquid drain out. At the end is a chute for pushing the drained oyster meat into a can.¹³ The circular blow tank is constructed of stainless steel with a Monel "collar" around the tank's periphery. It works by mixing compressed air into the water held in the tank, which agitated the water to thoroughly clean the oyster meat of shell, sand and dirt particles.¹⁴

¹¹ The J.C. Lore Oyster House is not square, due to settlement and construction techniques, so room dimensions are not accurate. Therefore, square footages are being given instead. See the accompanying drawing set for floor plans and exterior dimensions.

¹² "Samples Show Oysters Fat and of Good Quality in Maryland," *Southern Fisherman* (September 1945), 100.

¹³ See Johnson, *Working the Water*, 155. The skimming table is marked Geo. Wahmann Manufacturing Company, Baltimore, Maryland.

¹⁴ The Lores purchased a 150-gallon stainless steel oyster blow tank for \$372 from Lawrence Ellerbrock, Inc., Manufacturers of Food Service Equipment, Kitchen, Galley and Cafeteria Equipment of Baltimore, Maryland, on August 19, 1948. See Invoice, Lawrence Ellerbrock, Inc., August 19, 1948, J.C. Lore Collection, Box 7, Folder 6, CMM Library; Johnson, *Working the Water*, 37, 154.

A set of double doors on the front façade opens to the approximately 450 square foot shipping room for easy access when loading trucks. There are also two cold closets (approximately 136 square feet and 210 square feet) on the north wall of shipping room, which were used for refrigerating packed barrels and cans. These rooms were added after the initial construction of the packing house, ca. 1950. On April 3, 1945, the Lores gave McCormick Asbestos Company of Baltimore specifications for two rooms: one at 12'-10" x 8'-9" x 8'-3" with a 42" door, the other at 12'-10" x 9'-3" x 8'-3" with a 32" door. The Lores wanted a quote on the cost of materials to insulate the rooms as well as the cost for an ice box door for the 42" doorway. On April 18, 1945, McCormick wrote back with a detailed estimate for the project. The insulation would consist of "two layers of 15# asphalt saturated felt" with one layer of 2" cork board on top. A second layer of 2" cork board in hot asphalt "further secured with wood skewers spaced at proper intervals" would be applied. The finish would be 1/2" cement mortar on the walls and floor, 1/8" asphalt emulsion on the ceiling, and one layer of 3" corkboard with a 3" concrete slab on top of the floor. The company suggested they build removable ramps and furnish and install a drain in each room. The total cost of the proposed work was \$1,325. Available evidence indicates the Lores decided to do the work themselves. An August 1, 1950 letter from Lore to the McCormick Asbestos Company stated, "I have almost finished putting the fiberglass in the ice-room we are building" and asked that a shipment of Laykold Cement be sent.¹⁵ One of the doors has a label reading "Jamison Cold Storage Door Co., Hagerstown, MD" on it. Currently, these cold closets are used for artifact storage and to screen films.

To the rear of the shipping room is the 1,634 square foot receiving room for shell storage. Added to the original oyster house in 1965, this utilitarian space currently contains freestanding exhibits but originally served as the receiving room for shipments of fresh oysters and seafood.

A stairway leads from the shipping room up to the second floor. A restroom is located at the southern end of the second floor, as well as an approximately 173 square foot storage room. Two offices are located along the front façade. The northern end of the second floor is taken up by a nearly 811 square foot storage room that currently serves as an exhibit space.

The administrative offices are the most well-finished spaces in the building and do not appear to have undergone much alteration. The 158 square foot front office currently contains a desk, chair, and some office equipment, such as a typewriter. A radiator heated the space. A pass-through window opens onto the landing and was probably used for pay disbursement. A door on the north wall of the front office leads to a closet containing a safe and filing cabinets, indicating that personnel, payroll and business transactions took place there. A door on the south wall leads to a second, nearly 134 square foot office also containing a desk and chair and heated by a radiator. Both offices are wood paneled (although the second office has a chair rail as well), have drop ceilings of acoustic tiles, and are lit by fluorescent ceiling light fixtures.

¹⁵ Correspondence between Lore and McCormick Asbestos Co., April 3, 1945, April 18, 1945, and August 1, 1950, J.C. Lore Collection, Box 3, Folder 3, CMM Library. The Lores also sent a request for an estimate to have an ice box size 12' x 20', which had been divided into two rooms, refrigerated to Electric Refrigerator Company, Baltimore, Maryland, and Frick Company, Baltimore, Maryland. They wanted one side to be refrigerated to 34 degrees and the other to be even colder. See J.C. Lore Collection, Box 2, Folder 1, CMM Library.

The larger north storage room has a door opening on the front façade, allowing supplies like cans to be hoisted up to the second floor rather than hand carried up the stairs. It also housed the refrigeration machinery and ice-making equipment. The Lores used a 1-ton York Klakice Machine purchased around 1940 for ice-making. This storage room and the smaller one on the opposite end of the building are largely unfinished, with wood floors, unfinished frame walls, and exposed beams indicative of their utilitarian purpose.¹⁶

PRODUCTION

The Lores' plant, with its streamlined efficiency, was heralded as "modern in every respect" due to the brothers' "up-to-date study and planning." The cleanliness of the operation was also emphasized in publications about the plant.¹⁷ A caption accompanying the photograph of their building in the *Fishing Gazette* read: "Inside this gleaming white building...an immaculate, modern packing plant." The accompanying article stated:

"Lore's" brand oysters pack a lot of tradition in each can, not old stuffy tradition that smells old...But the finest modern tradition in food handling that is reflected in the showcase white of its painted buildings, and the paint and the polish that is everywhere on the inside. All white and gleaming on one of Solomon's main, waterfront thoroughfares, the first view of this outstanding plant for some reason makes one think of a bride, all in white.¹⁸

Although the oyster packing house probably did not make most passersby think of a bride, the color white did trigger associations with cleanliness and good hygiene in the minds of consumers. In fact, the Lore operation was equated to a scientific laboratory as "oyster packing here appears to be a science of cleanliness," revealing the Lores' concerns with sanitation and cleanliness in order to attract consumers and maintain their business.¹⁹ The "skimming room" (probably referring to the processing room since it housed the skimming tables) was reportedly "spotless white and the operator is clean and tidy." The shucking rooms were kept clean of shells and other debris, and washing stands (like the one located in the shucking room near the pass-through window to the processing room) encouraged workers to keep their hands clean. The lavatories, as well, were "regulated so as to maintain sanitation."²⁰ These descriptions reveal how the oyster industry evolved from a local, unregulated industry to one that had to conform to health and sanitary regulations. An outbreak of typhoid fever in 1924 increased

¹⁶ The Lores were not particularly pleased with the Klakice machine. In 1942, they indicated their displeasure in a letter to J.J. Murphy of the Maryland Refrigerator Company of Baltimore, Maryland, stating "they felt keenly disappointed in the cost of service and the performance of our York Ice Unit," and that they had resorted to buying ice as a result. Letter to J.J. Murphy of Maryland Refrigerator Company, February 5, 1942, J.C. Lore Collection, Box 3, Folder 3, CMM Library; Eshelman, "J.C. Lore Oyster House," NHL Nomination, 6.

¹⁷ George LeVecque, "Planned Production Provides Adequate Supplies of Oysters for these Maryland Planters," *Southern Fisherman* (December 1951), 96.

¹⁸ "76 Years of Oyster Lore: Three generations of a Maryland family have devoted themselves to oysters at J.C. Lore & Sons," *Fishing Gazette* (1964), in Lore Oyster House vertical file, H-L4, CMM Library.

¹⁹ "76 Years of Oyster Lore."

²⁰ LeVecque, 96.

consumer concerns about oyster consumption since typhoid, as well as other diseases like cholera and viral hepatitis A, could be picked up by oysters growing in contaminated waters or during processing and transporting if either took place in an unsanitary environment.²¹ In order to inspire consumer confidence in the Lore brand, therefore, a sanitary setting was essential.

Efficiency in processing was also important in keeping the oysters safe for consumption: “the operation is concise, direct and well-planned” so that “everything is handled with a minimum of time and effort.” The plant utilized “straight line production methods” resulting in “no unnecessary handling or wasted motion.”²² The journey of the oyster at the J.C. Lore Oyster House from the water to the can began at the rear of the packing house with the delivery of fresh oysters. A company worker would tally the bushels of oysters received before the floor men transported them to the receiving room.²³ A hoist house on the north end of the bulkhead housed the hoisting equipment necessary for unloading boats, sheltered the operator, and served as a buying station. From 1945-65, “boats could tie up very close to a one-story shed attached to the rear of the original building. A pulley hoist system rigged on the roof of the shed allowed unloading directly from the boat to a hole in the ceiling of the former receiving room.”²⁴ A motion picture from ca. 1950 shows a worker on the roof of the building dumping oysters from a bucket attached to the hoist into a hole in the roof. He then swung the empty bucket back to the boat where a worker pulled the bucket down and refilled it with fresh oysters.²⁵ After the construction of the 1965 concrete block addition, oysters could be unloaded from the boats directly into the addition via a conveyor belt. The Lores purchased a portable conveyor belt in 1967 that could be set up from the water’s edge to the one story structure atop the addition. Valley Forge Conveyors, Inc. of Norristown, Pennsylvania, supplied the Lores with one 40’ inclined belt conveyor with a black neoprene belt. The bed of the conveyor, according to a letter and invoice, was “to be boxed slider bed type with 5” high side guards bolted to conveyor bed.” A 3/4 horsepower right angle gear motor would drive the conveyor.²⁶ Joseph Lore Jr. remembered that the Lores’ buy boat, the WILLIAM B. TENNISON, would “come right along the inside and hoist the oysters up by a (?) and empty the oysters out on the roof of the house. We had a hatch up on top of the roof, you know, we’d lift that hatch up and unload the boat there. Then of course later when we built onto the house we had a conveyor that went right from the boat right on up to the hatch in the house.”²⁷

After the fresh oysters had been delivered to the receiving room at the rear of the packing house, floor men would fill wire baskets with the unshucked oysters, put the baskets into wheelbarrows, and wheel them into one of the two shucking rooms where they would dump the oysters onto the shucking tables lining the walls. Floor men, “usually young, strong” males, also had the

²¹ P.C. Wood, “Guide to Shellfish Hygiene” (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1976), 21, 23, 26; MacKenzie, “History of Oystering.”

²² LeVecque, 32, 96.

²³ Johnson, *Working the Water*, 37.

²⁴ Eshelman, “J.C. Lore Oyster House,” NHL Nomination, 5.

²⁵ “Lore Oyster House: Operations of J.C. Lore & Sons,” videocassette, ca. 1950, converted to videotape from unedited motion picture films by an unidentified producer, CMM Library.

²⁶ Valley Forge Conveyors, Inc., letters to J.C. Lore & Sons and invoice, September 1967, J.C. Lore Collection, Box 6, Folder 1, CMM Library.

²⁷ Johnson and Kurtze, Lore interview, 7.

responsibility of removing the empty shells that had collected around the shucking stands and dumping those shells onto the outside shell piles.²⁸

Once the floor men had delivered the oysters to the shucking tables, the shuckers went to work extracting the meat. They stood facing the table on “shucking stands,” which were three-sided boxes constructed of wood with a solid bottom step. The shucking stands elevated the workers above the wet, cold, and shell-cluttered floor, while the sides protected them from the sharp discarded shells being thrown down after the oyster meat had been extracted. While shuckers usually developed their own techniques for extracting the oyster from its shell, there was a general method.

A shucker grasps an oyster in his left with its flat shell up, presses it against the table, the hinge end pointed away from him, and inserts the tip of the oyster knife between the shells at the broad end. The knife enters the oyster about one-third of the distance from the bill to the hinge and on the side nearest to the man. This point is opposite the large muscle that holds the two shells together. In the next motion, the muscle is cut, following which the knife is used as a lever and one or the other of the shells is pried off and discarded. Better shuckers employ only six motions in this entire procedure. The oyster, or “meat,” as it is now called, is now cut from the remaining shell and dropped into a pail.²⁹

The meat was sized and put in the standards bucket (smallest oysters), the selects bucket (medium oysters), or the counts bucket (largest oysters). When the buckets were full, the shucker took them to the pass-through window to the processing room. The worker on the other side would dump the oysters into the nearby skimmer, rinse and drain them, put them in a container, and weigh them. Despite the skill and dexterity required of shuckers, Paula Johnson points out that they held the lowest position in the oyster house hierarchy because “unlike all other groups of workers, their role was clearly defined and singular.” In Maryland, shuckers were generally women or children and immigrants or African Americans, because “historically, shucking oysters was considered a menial, dirty job, typically relegated to the poorest people.”³⁰ The low status of the shucker, however, belied the importance of their position in the process. A good shucker was invaluable since shucking was an operation that could not be mechanized due to the lack of uniformity in oysters. The variations in each oyster shell prevented “producing a machine that can separate the two shells of oysters...at *exactly* the right spot so as not to damage the meat is not only difficult it is next to impossible.”³¹

In the processing room, the skimmer man dumped the shucked oysters onto the skimming table, thoroughly rinsing the oyster meat with an overhead hose. After the meat drained for a time on the table, it was put into containers for weighing. The weights were recorded next to the shucker’s name on a tally board in the processing room, located just inside the pass-through

²⁸ Johnson, *Working the Water*, 37-38.

²⁹ Fred W. Sieling, “Maryland’s Commercial Fishing Gears II, The Oyster Gears,” No. 25 (Solomons Island, MD: Maryland Department of Research and Education, May 1950), 18.

³⁰ Johnson, *Working the Water*, 37-38.

³¹ Johnson, *Working the Water*, 45.

window. The skimmer man then dumped the weighed oyster meat into a blow tank to clean it of any residual sand, shell, and dirt particles. Once thoroughly cleaned, the oyster meat was scooped out and drained on another skimming table before being packed into cans. The Lores rented a capper to seal and close the cans, which were then sent on a conveyor extending through a pass-through window to the shipping room. A motion picture of the company's operations from ca. 1950 shows the filled cans being packed into barrels with crushed ice.³² If not being immediately shipped out, workers packed the cans and barrels into one of the cold storage rooms in the shipping room where they would stay until shipment day.

LORE COMPANY HISTORY

Joseph C. Lore of New Jersey came to Solomons, Maryland, in 1888 as a representative buyer for William Brown, J.D. Neal & Co., and R.T. Lore (his uncle). He purchased oysters for the companies, graded them and shipped the oyster meat out in barrels by steamboat to Philadelphia. His son, Joseph C. Lore Jr., remembered "before we went into the oyster processing business" in 1922, "we were in the soft crab and hard crab business, you know, we dealt with...an awful lot of soft crabs."³³ Lore Sr. also briefly involved himself in shipping sturgeon caviar from Virginia to a buyer in Germany, the only such operation known to be in existence on the Western Shore of the Chesapeake.³⁴ Joseph Lore Sr. died in 1945, and his sons, Joseph Lore Jr. (Joe) and G. I. Rupert Lore (Dick), took over the business. In 1961, the Lore brothers' partnership ended. Rupert left for St. Mary's County, Maryland. He and his sons purchased Charles E. Davis Seafood of Wynne, creating G.I. Rupert Lore & Sons, Inc. (1961-68).³⁵ Meanwhile, Joe kept the J.C. Lore Oyster House in operation. In 1962, Alton S. Kersey, Joe's son-in-law, became manager. In the 1970s, the company's output decreased as the quality of expensive seed oysters began to decline, and by 1978, the Lore Oyster House had closed along with much of the rest of the area's oyster industry. The Calvert County Government purchased the Lore Oyster House for the Calvert Marine Museum using a grant from the Maritime Division of the National Trust for Historic Preservation to house interpretive exhibits on the Patuxent River seafood industry. In 1984, the building was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and in 2001 it was declared a National Historic Landmark.³⁶

The Lore Company maintained a frenetic schedule throughout the year, dealing not just in oysters.

In the spring of the year we handled shad and herring, all the spring fish. Then in the summer we were in with...croakers and trout and things of that sort. We handled fish up until the second World War and also crabmeat. We got into

³² "Lore Oyster House: Operations of J.C. Lore & Sons," videocassette.

³³ Eshelman, Lore interview; Johnson and Kurtze, Lore interview, 1.

³⁴ "The J.C. Lore & Sons Company: A Brief History," no date, unpaginated, Lore Oyster House vertical file, H-L4, CMM Library; Eshelman, Lore interview.

³⁵ Dodds and Hurry, 48-49; "A Brief History," unpaginated. Dick operated the business with his sons Jon Shaw and Joseph Clayton, which included not only a packing house, but also a grocery store, warehouse, ice plant, ice house, oyster shell grinding mill, and lime shed.

³⁶ "A Brief History," unpaginated.

packing crabmeat in about the middle 20s...we used to pack...about I would say from 50 to 75 barrels a day we would pick out. But our capacity, I'd like to think, we had one day that we really went overboard on the production of crabmeat and we picked 140 barrels of crabs one day.

The overlap of seasons, from oyster to shad to crab and then back to oyster, kept the business in constant operation. Joseph Lore Jr. remembered that during the company's heyday, "we had very little time for even a day off as far as that goes. We were working all the time."³⁷

During the crab season, "thirty 100-pound barrels of crabs" would be boiled in a steam boiler located at the Lores' pier. A steam whistle called the crab pickers (who were primarily African-American) to the plant. Workers divided along gender lines, with men picking the claws and women picking the bodies. The work provided a great deal of flexibility as workers could come and go on their own schedule. The picked meat would then be weighed in the packing room, packed in barrels on ice, and shipped to Washington, D.C. Joseph Lore Jr. stated, "I used to sell crabmeat, clawmeat, for 10 cents a pound and regular meat for 15, 18 cents a pound, and special and backfin around 45, 50 cents a pound. And we used to buy hard crab for about 2 cents a pound and we'd sell the crabmeat, and that's why we'd have to sell it so cheap, there were so many crabs on the market then, you know."³⁸

At first, J.C. Lore & Sons Oyster, Fish and Crab Packers operated locally. The Lores sold seafood to local buyers in Washington, D.C., Maryland and Pennsylvania, either via delivery or shipped parcel post. By the end of the 1920s, they had established a large-scale operation, selling to chains like the ACME markets and Kroger, who picked up oysters once a week from the Lores. Joseph Lore Jr. recalled shipping oysters to Kroger's headquarters in Cincinnati as well as to their warehouses in Madison, Chicago, and Little Rock.³⁹ From 1956 until their closure in 1978, the Lores supplied the U.S. government's Defense Subsistence Supply System, shipping oysters to Baltimore where they were flash frozen and sent to military installations all over the world, such as a research station in Antarctica.⁴⁰

During World War II, the establishment of government installations like the Patuxent River Naval Air Station in April 1943 lured locals away from the seafood packing business. The Lores ceased packing crab meat because of the lack of workers, although they maintained the more profitable oyster processing operation. Financial records document the declining profits of the oyster industry in the mid-twentieth century, the result of overharvesting, environmental problems, and disease. The J.C. Lore & Sons financial information indicates that in 1949, the net worth of the company was \$92,582 with annual sales of over \$200,000. In 1952, net worth

³⁷ Johnson and Kurtze, Lore interview, 2, 4.

³⁸ Johnson and Kurtze, Lore interview, 2-3.

³⁹ "A Brief History," unpaginated; Johnson and Kurtz, Lore interview, 1.

⁴⁰ Oysters were generally shipped to installations in gallon cans packed with 6 pounds of oyster meat, but the Lores suggested packing 7 pounds in a can, which would still allow the requisite empty space for expansion during freezing. They won an award for their suggestion. Eshelman, "J.C. Lore Oyster House," NHL Nomination, 12.

was \$109,708 with sales of \$194,989. A 1956 financial report indicated another increase in net worth to \$116,486, as well as a decrease in sales to \$155,362.⁴¹

As Maryland's oyster population declined, the Lores became involved in oyster cultivation. Capt. William Preston Lore, brother of Joe and Dick, had a separate oyster planting operation, while Joe and Dick experimented with growing seed oysters obtained from the James River in Virginia in their private beds in the Patuxent River to help maintain their supply. These private beds became "the backbone" of the business.⁴² In 1951, Rupert Lore reported that the company had harvested 75,000 bushels, most from 300 acres of beds on the Patuxent River in Maryland and the Nansemond River in Virginia, as well as two beds in the Delaware Bay. Rupert stated, "like the land farmer, we have to buy seed, or raise our own seed. We do both."⁴³

The Lores were involved in other business ventures outside seafood processing. In a building next to their packing plant, they operated a confectionary, lunch room, cigar store, and U.S. Post Office. This building was torn down in 1995, and the Calvert County Government purchased the land in 1998. The Lores rented boats and sold bait for pleasure fishing trips as well. In the Solomons community, the Lores were known not just for their successful processing plant but also for their civic activities. Joseph Lore Jr. and Rupert served as commodores of the Solomons Island Yacht Club. They contributed to area charitable institutions and maintained a school bus for transporting local children to and from school.⁴⁴

The Lores branched into turning processing byproducts into fertilizer, as did other seafood processing plants. When they were involved in crab picking, they advertised "We have taken the agency for Ground Crab Scrap Fertilizer from the Crisfield Fertilizer Co." and that they were bringing the business to Calvert County.⁴⁵ The Lores also found a use for their oyster shells. James Osborn Lore operated a lime plant on Ship Point, Solomons in the early 1920s, and the Lores would funnel their shells to his enterprise. After processing the shells into lime, James Osborn would then deliver the lime to area farms along the Patuxent River via a 1917 freight boat called the WESTOVER.⁴⁶ Most of the shells, however, went back to the state as cultch for public oyster bars, in accordance with Maryland state law.

EMPLOYEES

Most of the Lores' employees were local, although sometimes in flush seasons they would hire shuckers from the Eastern Shore. During peak production, the Lores employed as many as 100 shuckers, but the more usual number was between forty and fifty.⁴⁷ During the 1950s, the Lores

⁴¹ Dunn & Bradstreet, Inc., reports, August 25, 1950, September 27, 1950, October 18, 1950, November 28, 1951, July 15, 1952, and September 26, 1956, in J.C. Lore Collection, CMM Library.

⁴² LeVecque, 32-33; "A Brief History," unpaginated. The Lores dredged their beds when the oysters reached a suitable size using their buy boats, WILLIAM B. TENNISON (60') and SIDNEY R. RIGGIN (55').

⁴³ Frank Henry, "Farming Invisible Fields," *Sun* [Baltimore, Maryland], April 22, 1951.

⁴⁴ LeVecque, 32.

⁴⁵ Advertisement, newspaper and date unknown, from Lore Oyster House vertical file, H-L4, CMM Library.

⁴⁶ Typewritten sheet in Lore Oyster House vertical file, H-L4, CMM Library.

⁴⁷ "A Brief History," unpaginated.

employed seventy-five people during busy periods.⁴⁸ The managers were all members of the Lore family: from 1888 to 1945, Joseph C. Lore Sr. managed the company; from 1945 to 1961, Joseph Lore Jr. (Joe) and G. I. Rupert Lore (his sons) were in charge; and from 1962 to 1978 when the company closed, Alton Kersey, son-in-law of Joe, served as manager. Dora Lore, wife of Rupert, held the position of secretary. Although she did not regularly work in the office, she was “active in a small fashion in a day to day operation of the business.” Joe’s wife Virginia served as treasurer but remained “generally inactive in the affairs of the company devoting herself mostly to household chores.”⁴⁹ The managers at times would do any of the jobs in the organization when necessary except shucking.⁵⁰

The Lore records contain some insight into their employees. One source is undated cards that give details about each employee, including birth date, hometown, education level, marital status and number of dependents (presumably for tax purposes), and race. Another available undated record lists shuckers and house employees as well as their union affiliation. From these sources, some conclusions can be drawn. Of the 466 employees identified as working for the Lores at some point, 155 were female and 311 were male. Those identified as “house employees,” referring to “floor men” and those working in the processing rooms, were all males. Of the nearly 115 employees with personal information available, nearly all were African Americans, only eleven were identified as white (excluding the Lores and Kerseys). The employee information also indicated the educational level for 105 workers, with the highest number achieving a seventh grade education and only one indicated as graduating from high school. Most employees had ended their schooling in the third, fourth, fifth or sixth grades.⁵¹

A comparison of the list of Lore Oyster House employees and lists of shuckers working at other companies, including Daniel Barrett Company of Appeal, Maryland; H.M. Woodburn & Sons of Solomons; Warren Denton and Co. of Broomes Island, Maryland; and Sollers & Dowell, shows shuckers were often employed at more than one operation.⁵² Shuckers were essentially pieceworkers, and although pay rates were generally the same, oyster houses had to have good quality oysters in order to attract the best shuckers. Demand for shuckers was also variable, dependent upon orders placed with the company and the oyster harvest. The most experienced and best shuckers would be hired first while others would have to find work at another oyster house. Shuckers also chose where to work depending on location, particularly during periods of

⁴⁸ See Dunn & Bradstreet, Inc., reports.

⁴⁹ Dunn & Bradstreet, Inc. report, September 25, 1956.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Working the Water*, 37.

⁵¹ The distribution is as follows: no education, 3 employees; first grade, 6 employees; second grade, 5 employees; third grade, 13 employees; fourth grade, 11 employees; fifth grade, 10 employees; sixth grade, 10 employees; seventh grade, 25 employees; eighth grade, 14 employees; some high school, 8 employees. Index cards, J.C. Lore Collection, Box 34, CMM Library.

⁵² According to the letterhead on the paper listing employees, Daniel Barrett & Sons (1938-59) specialized in Patuxent River Oysters and claimed to be “wholesale planters, packers and shippers of Maryland famous Chesapeake Bay and Patuxent River oysters of the best quality”; H.M Woodburn & Son (1918-43) were wholesalers in oysters, fish and crabs; and Warren Denton and Co. (1927-83, 1984-2001) specialized in fish, oysters and crabs. Sollers & Dowell operated from 1936-46. See J.C. Lore Collection, Box 91, Folder 6, CMM Library; Johnson, *Working the Water*, Figure 10, p. 36.

bad weather. The evidence of shuckers working at more than one plant reveals the fluidity of the profession.⁵³

Although shucking was at the lowest level in the packing plant's organization hierarchy, workers found ways to protect their pay, most notably by striking. In the late 1930s, workers in the oyster industry in Calvert County were involved in two strikes. On December 6, 1938, an estimated 300 African-American shuckers walked out of plants on Solomons Island, Broomes Island, Sollers and Lusby, "striking against the continuation of a wage reduction they previously had agreed upon." Shuckers had reportedly agreed to work for 25 cents a gallon instead of the usual 30 cents a gallon because warm weather had negatively impacted the oyster harvest, but that changed when shuckers decided they did indeed want to be paid at the higher rate. On December 7, the *Evening Sun* reported that "Calvert County's first organized strike" ended when the shuckers returned to work.⁵⁴ In November 1939, a strike impacted five shucking plants in Calvert County with 252 workers striking for a 5 cent pay increase to 30 cents. At the J.C. Lore Oyster House, sixty employees refused to work. Packers contended again that poor harvests prevented them from increasing wages.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

By the end of the nineteenth century, Maryland was the leader in oyster production in the U.S. and the world, producing a record 15 million bushels of oysters in one season.⁵⁶ Despite legislation regulating the industry, though, oyster harvests declined throughout the twentieth century due to pollution, disease and overharvesting. The J.C. Lore Oyster House remains as a highly intact remnant of the once great Maryland oyster industry, preserving both the method of oyster processing and packing and the stories of the industry's workers.

⁵³ Email communication with Robert Hurry, Registrar, CMM, February 18, 2005; see also Johnson, "'Sloppy Work for Women': Shucking Oysters on the Patuxent," in *Working the Water*.

⁵⁴ "Oyster Shuckers Strike in Calvert," *Evening Sun* [Baltimore, Maryland], December 6, 1938, and "Oyster Shuckers Return to Work," *Evening Sun*, December 7, 1938, both in Lore Oyster House vertical file, H-L4, CMM Library.

⁵⁵ "Strike Closes Five Maryland Oyster Plants," *Evening Sun*, November 13, 1939, and "Shucker Strike Seen Forcing Season Close," *Evening Sun*, November 14, 1939, both in Lore Oyster House vertical file, H-L4, CMM Library.

⁵⁶ G.F. Beaven, "Maryland's Oyster Problem," State of Maryland, Board of Natural Resources, Department of Research and Education, Solomons Island, MD, Educational Series, no. 8 (May 1945), 3.

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